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Notes

[Contributions in the form of notes or discussions should be sent to John A. Scott, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.]

LATINITY AND WIRELESS

The human abomination who throws cold water on every noteworthy achievement by reciting precedent is always with us; indeed, he is only a variety of the species that damns with faint praise. For example, when the Wright brothers first demonstrated to the world the practicability of mechanical flight, fulsome accounts of the efforts of Langley, Lillienthal, Penaud, and the Marquis de Bacqueville did much to divert public attention from a genuine success. In the present instance, however, in recording an early anticipation of wireless telegraphy we shall endeavor to avoid this fault and at the outset disclaim all intention of dimming the glory of Edison, Hertz, and Marconi by implying that they were but following a trail already blazed. The probability is that none of these men had ever heard of the famous contemporary of Shakespeare who had suggested in a Latin poem the possibility of utilizing electricity for projecting messages across space. Even though this writer had but a faint vision of what might be achieved, yet it is instructive to scientists to know that so advanced a mind lived in an age that is not rated high for its scientific thought and attainment. It is the interest of the classicist, however, that is chiefly aroused, for the man to whom the vision came was the greatest Latin scholar of his century, commanding a style which for purity and force did not fall far short of that of the Golden Age of Latinity.

Famianus Strada, the Roman Jesuit, was born in 1572 and died in 1649. His greatest literary work is a series of essays which he himself entitled *Prolusiones Academicae.* In one of these essays he endeavors to imitate the style of several of the greater Latin poets, such as Vergil, Ovid, Lucretius, Lucan, and Statius. The verses that he attributes to Lucretius are those that claim our attention now; as it happens, though they are the most famous of his compositions, they are by far the least successful as an imitation. However, he had the fine sense of the fitness of things to a sufficient degree to choose the poetic exponent of a scientific doctrine as the vehicle for transmitting to posterity a scientific dream. In the translation of the poem that follows much of the redundancy and simplicity of the original will be preserved, since they were obviously affected by the author as suggestive of Lucretius and of the incomplete scientific knowledge of his time.

"To avoid dealing with an idle theme," says Strada, turning from Lucan to Lucretius, "I shall instruct my fellows in the most expeditious manner of communicating with absent friends, and that without the use of letters or messengers." Then begins the poem.

"There is a wonderful kind of stone that comes from Magnesia. A piece of iron, or, say, a needle, if brought near it, derives from it a certain energy and motion which make it invariably turn toward the Great Bear, the constellation that is neighbor to the Pole. Moreover, all needles that have once been brought into contact with this stone simultaneously and with marvellous uniformity possess the same motion and assume the same position. Thus it happens that if any one of them is moved at Rome, another, no matter how distant, follows the same path in virtue of the mysterious natural bond between them.

"Suppose, then, that you wish to convey a message to a distant friend to whom you cannot send a letter. Take a broad, circular disk and around its circumference write the letters of the alphabet in the order in which school-children learn them. In the centre lay a needle, which has been touched by a Magnesian stone, in such a way that as it turns it can point to any letter you may wish. In like manner, make another disk similar to this, also provided with letters and an iron needle that has been endowed with motion by a magnet. When your friend departs, let him take this latter disk with him, but not till you have come to a mutual understanding as to the hours and the days when he is to endeavor to ascertain whether the needle is shifting about and what it signifies.

"Now if, after these preparations, you desire to speak secretly with the friend in a far land, put your hand to the disk and turn the iron needle. Before you around the margin lie the letters that are required for the formation of words. To these point the needle, touching now this letter and now that, until you spell out one by one all the thoughts that are in your mind. Then —believe it who can!—your friend, though far away, sees his needle moving of itself, turning this way and that. Intently he fixes his gaze upon it, following its movement from letter to letter and, combining these into words, reads the message. Nay, more, when he sees the iron cease to move, he in his turn, if he has an answer to send back, touches the various letters in like manner and thus replies to his friend.

"Would that this method of communication might become general! A letter would then be more confidential and go more quickly on its way, unthreatened by the attacks of highwaymen and undelayed by rivers. With his own hands a master could carry on his correspondence and we scribes would emerge from our sea of ink and dedicate our pens to the kingdom of the magnet."

In addition to anticipating telegraphy with or without wires Strada in this ingenious fancy also anticipates the telautograph, the electrical device by which handwriting, designs, and black and white drawings are transmitted over wires. Although, of course, the analogy is by no means perfect, yet it is suggested by the exactly similar movements of the needles on the two disks.

As far as we know, however, telautography has not yet been attempted without the use of wires.

Fancy stimulates fancy. In 1711, a century all but six years after the first publication of Strada's conceit, the poem attracted the attention of Joseph Addison. An alleged correspondent of the *Spectator*, a woman whose husband was abroad in the "Service of his Country," despairingly asked the editor how absent lovers could "support themselves under those long separations which they are sometimes forced to undergo." In reply Addison published a paraphrase of Strada's verses, appending to it a suggestion of his own. "If ever this invention should be revived or put into practice, I would propose that upon the Lover's Dial-plate there should be written not only the four and twenty Letters, but several entire Words which have always a Place in passionate Epistles, as Flames, Darts, Die, Language, Absence, Cupid, Heart, Eyes, Hang, Drown, and the like. This would very much abridge the Lover's Pains in this way of writing a Letter, as it would enable him to express the most useful and significant Words with a single Touch of the Needle."

Now if Strada anticipated modern telegraphy in its various branches, is it not equally fair to give Addison the credit of anticipating, even though in pleasantry, the telegraphic code?

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ATHENS IN THE AGE OF PERICLES

In the article by Van Hook in the May *Classical Journal*, page 481, occurs the statement "Physical labor is condemned by Aristotle in that it is cheapening to work for another for pay or material profit as this reduces one to the rank of a slave. This would seem to be the chief source for the curious statement everywhere repeated that all Athenians who did anything for pay were condemned."

By way of comment on the word "everywhere" it may be worth while to refer to a book not among those enumerated on page 475, *The days of Alkibiades*, by C. E. Robinson.[1] On page 103 the author says, "In one workshop which he passed Theodoras saw a sculptor engaged in shaping out a group of the Three Graces. . . . . It was Sokrates, throwing the same simple-hearted zest that he gave to conversation into the earning of his daily bread; for neither he nor any true son of Athens thought shame to labour for his livelihood. Not that he would let out his labour for day-hire, that was worse, if anything, than to take a fee for a lecture as his rival sophists did. But free independent craftsmanship was another matter. Offer him a contract for a statue, a

[1] Longmans, 1917.